

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Speaker: Mr. George Bell

Philippians - The Christian Life: The Gospel into Europe - Acts 16:1-40

Europe

Europe! Never has there been a time when so much is said about Europe. Every newspaper, every news bulletin, it is right in the news! Will Great Britain join up to monetary union? We will just have to leave this to the politicians to argue about. Europe is to be the subject of our talk today. Somewhere around two thousand years ago, the gospel of the grace of God moved west into Europe. How thankful we should be that we became the recipients of that gospel. For the next five talks, the Epistle of Paul to the church at Philippi is to be the subject. Today, we will think about the way the gospel came to Philippi in Macedonia and how this church came into being.

It all happened on Paul's second missionary journey into Gentile territory (Acts 15:36-18:22). The account given in Acts 15:36-16:10 conveys the impression that events took an unexpected turn. The original intention of this journey is given in Acts 15:36. We read, "Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do." Paul was not only concerned with breaking into new ground and seeking the lost, but he realised also the necessity for shepherd care. There is always the need for believers to be established in the faith. It may be in our day that we are not as diligent as we should be as to this matter. Let us take this to heart.

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit was in control throughout this journey. As it turned out it wasn't Barnabas who accompanied Paul; it was Silas (Acts 15:40). There had been a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36-41). Because of this they parted company (Acts 15:39). It is very interesting that Paul also took Timothy with him. He was a young man in whom the Apostle had great confidence and who proved to be an asset. We must never disdain the young; they need to be encouraged. There is an encouraging note in Acts 16:5. It has been referred to as 'a progress report', of which there are a number in Acts. "And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily". It is at this point that the authority of the Holy Spirit and His guidance is to be seen. It seems as if there was a desire on the part of the Lord's servants to make for Asia, but they were forbidden of the Holy Spirit to preach there (Acts 16:6). That wasn't all; we are told that they "assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not" (Acts 16:7).

The call from Europe

They were not left to their own plans. They eventually came to Troas (Acts 16:8), and while there, positive direction was given to Paul by a vision in the night, "There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us." This was a call from Europe. There was no longer any doubt as to the route to be taken by Paul. Another feature that gives further emphasis to the importance of this occasion is that Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, speaks on behalf of the missionary company (Acts 16:10). This is the first occasion on which he does so. It is no longer what "they" do; it is what "we" do. Another aspect of divine guidance comes into the picture here. Let us think of what Luke says, "immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them" (Acts 16:10). When it is a question of service the Lordship of Christ is emphasised.

One verse only is sufficient to describe the journey taken into Europe. There was no hesitancy on the part of Paul and the others in answering the call. Eventually they came to Philippi which was a chief city of that part of Macedonia (Acts 16:12). It was a Roman colony. Evidently there was no synagogue there; otherwise they would have visited that first. On the Sabbath they went out of the city by a riverside, where some were accustomed to gather for prayer. Luke says, "we sat down, and spake unto the women which resorted thither" (Acts 16:13). This was a good start; these women were God fearing; maybe some were Jews but they were at the place where prayer was made. There was a certain woman there (Acts 16:14). It becomes very obvious here that it is Luke who is writing. This is exactly his method. Note the Gospel of Luke and how often he uses this form of speech. "A certain man made a great supper" (Luke 14:16), and again "a certain man had two sons" (Luke 15:11). And so here it is "a certain woman" (Acts 16:14)

Lydia

Let's think now of this beautiful character, Lydia. The firstfruits in Europe was not to be a man, but a woman. We know very little about her really. We are told about her livelihood as a seller of purple (Acts 16:14); we learn that she came from Thyatira (Acts 16:14). But that which is of interest to us is that she worshipped God (Acts 16:14). At some time in her life she had fled from idolatry. As Paul spoke to these women it says of Lydia, "Whose heart the Lord opened" (Acts 16:14). We are not told what Paul said, but we can be sure it was the Gospel of Christ she heard. One thing we learn here is that in any work we may do in seeking others, it is the Lord who opens the heart.

The evidence of her faith is seen in two ways. One is that she understood the need to be baptised. And so we read, "She was baptised, and her household" (Acts 16:15). There was also witness in her life. She opened her house to the Apostle and the others and they stayed there (Acts 16:15). Hospitality is a feature of practical Christianity. The Apostle writes of this in 1 Timothy 3:2 "given to hospitality". Where there is true conversion there will be signs following. This was certainly the case with Lydia. The gospel had gained a foothold in Europe.

Your adversary

The first contact in Europe had proved to be a genuine conversion. There is no doubt that the little band of preachers must have been encouraged. From what follows there are lessons to learn. When things seem to be going well, we must never be complacent; we need always to be watchful. The enemy is never very far away. Who is he? Peter, in his first epistle provides the answer, "your adversary the devil", 1 Peter 5:8. Where there is a work of God, Satan will oppose it. Never let us underestimate his subtlety! This turned out to be the case in Philippi. 1 Peter 5:8 refers to the devil "as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour."

This was not the way the devil showed himself first of all at Philippi. It was more his craft. Let's see what actually happened then (Acts 16:16-24). This time Luke says "a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination" (Acts 16:16). If we put this into modern terms, the girl was probably a fortune teller. There were those who used her for their own gain; it became a matter of business interests. This young girl followed Paul and the others and cried saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, which show unto us the way of salvation" (Acts 16:17). This may have sounded very good; she was saying the right things! She did this many days until Paul was grieved by her persistence (Acts 16:18). The Apostle was able to discern that an evil spirit was in control of this girl. Scriptures like this one should make us leave spiritism well alone. It is entirely opposed to Christianity and the dangers are very real. Let us be very careful not to be tempted to seek a way out of our anxieties in this way. Many do! The believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has confidence in the promises of God as found in His word. Just think of the well loved verse, "All things work together for good to them that love God..." (Romans 8:28).

Returning again to the narrative in Acts 16, the Apostle eventually took decisive action and cast out the evil spirit by a word. We read "And he came out the same hour" (Acts 16:18). What happened to this young girl we do not know, so it isn't wise for us to speculate.

One thing we do know is that the whole attitude of the city of Philippi towards Paul and Silas changed (Acts 16:19-24). We have already referred to the devil as a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). No longer is he putting on the façade of an "angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). The employers of this young girl, when they saw that "the hope of their gains was gone" (Acts 16:19), became violent in their opposition to the Apostles. This is not what they said of course. They played into the hands of the people and the magistrates saying, "These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city" (Acts 16:20). But it was business interests that lay at the heart of their opposition. Eventually the Lord's two servants were beaten (Acts 16:22) and cast into prison (Acts 16:23), the magistrates charging the jailer to keep them safely (Acts 16:23). He didn't show them much mercy but added to their troubles by thrusting them into the inner prison, making their feet fast in the stocks (Acts 16:24). Although the Lord's work in Europe began very quietly in the conversion of Lydia (Acts 16:11-15), the devil soon showed his character as the "adversary". Also, he had tried to spoil the work by his craftiness, but that strategy hadn't worked, so he tried persecution. This did not work either as we will soon see; God will not be defeated!

In Prison

We have reached a critical point in the advance of the gospel into Europe. Paul and Silas are in prison! Hadn't they been given clear guidance as to the course to be followed? The two Apostles, however, were not down in their spirits, they were not complaining about their sufferings. Instead of that they, "prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them" (Acts 16:25). Now, what can the devil do with men like this? There is one thing certain; the work will not be stopped. This is one of the triumphs of the faith of Christianity. You may remember in the early part of the book of Acts that Peter and others were "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41). The Lord Jesus warned His disciples when with them, "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). Just think of His sufferings, enduring the contradiction of sinners against Himself

(Hebrews 12:3) and also the bitterness of the cross. It is no different today; the name of Christ is still in reproach. The Gospel is still unpopular. We must be prepared for this if we give ourselves to the Lord's service.

An earthquake

How graphic Luke is as he describes the next part of the incident as told in Acts 16:25-40. We are told that it was midnight when the Apostles were praying and praising God (Acts 16:25). It was then that we read, "And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed" (Acts 16:26) There have always been earthquakes; many of us were saddened in early 1999 by the terrible destruction caused by the earthquake in Colombia. The earthquake we have read about in Acts 16:26 seems to have been directed toward the jailer. When God's grace is acting, He will go to great lengths to reach a lost soul. How could God reach this hard hearted man? As well as the physical earthquake which filled him with fear (Acts 16:26), there was also a moral earthquake reaching his conscience. God speaks to men and women in various ways. In the Old Testament we read of God making His presence felt in the wind, in the earthquake, in the fire, and at other times in a still small voice (see 1 Kings 19:12). Maybe it was the still small voice that reached Lydia (Acts 16:14), but it was going to take much more to affect the jailer. Could it be that someone listening to this talk today can remember some experience in which God spoke to them? The point is, have you paid heed to His voice?

There is one thing we can be assured of; when God speaks to men and women, He does so in love. The scriptures assure us that it is God's desire that all men should be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). We are going to see what happened to the Philippian jailer.

Attempted suicide

Let's think now of the conversion of this man. His first thought, as he saw the prisoners' bands loosed, was, "Had they escaped?" (Acts 16:27) It was his responsibility to see that they were kept secure. This is why he took a sword to kill himself (Acts 16:27). How near he was to a suicide's grave! The remarkable thing was that, although the doors were open and the bands loosed, there was no escape. Paul had to act quickly, which he did, crying out, "Do thyself no harm: for we are all here" (Acts 16:28). How evident it is that God had everything under control. He had the jailer in view for salvation. There was no other way of reaching him but to put Paul and Silas into the prison beside him. An earthquake was needed to make him realise his need. So now, with a feeling of fear and insecurity, he "came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas" (Acts 16:29). What a change had come over this cruel man! He brought the two Apostles out, and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30) What a momentous question! He received a wonderful answer! "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31)

Believe

Is there any one listening to this talk today who has felt the need of salvation? To feel a need is a good thing. People in these days have lost the sense of the gravity of sin and its consequences. You may say that you are not like this jailer. But the truth is, as the Bible says, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) We all need salvation from the penalty which our sins deserve. There is salvation available from the power of sin in our lives as well as a hope of heaven and freedom from the presence of sin. The answer given by Paul to the jailer's question was, "Believe" (Acts 16:31). There was nothing said about doing! Salvation is by faith! Another well known verse says, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth ... his faith is counted for righteousness" (Romans 4:5). If you have never given heed to this important matter don't put it off. To provide this salvation for us, God sent his Son into the world. He was hated by men and crucified. Through that very death, God found a righteous way of providing salvation for all. Let's just think again of what the Bible says in Romans 4:25; "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification."

How important it is that new believers be instructed. It says that they spoke to the jailer and all his house the word of the Lord (Acts 16:32). Just as there had been evidence of Lydia's faith, so it was in the jailer's life. He took Paul and Silas and washed their stripes (Acts 16:33). He was baptised, he and all his, straightway (Acts 16:33). He brought them to his house, fed them and rejoiced, believing with all his house (Acts 16:34). And, so the Gospel came to Europe! The two Apostles were brought out of the prison with dignity; they had been treated unlawfully (Acts 16:35). They then entered the house of Lydia, saw the brethren, comforted them and departed. Thus, a company of believers was found at Philippi. Paul wrote to these believers when he was again in prison, this time in Rome. The contents of this letter will be considered in the following five talks, if the Lord will.

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